DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 346 515 CS 507 830

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TITLE Eloquence as Virtue in Ancient Theory.
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Greek Civilization; Philosophy; Public Speaking; *Rhetoric; *Rhetorical Theory; Skill Development
IDENTIFIERS *Classical Rhetoric; Plato of Athens; Socrates; Sophists; *Virtues

ABSTRACT

Plato attacked the sophists' claim that they taught "virtue," and he believed that rhetoric, which they taught, was not an "art." If the notions of virtue and art are brought together and integrated to constitute an antithesis, the sophistic position becomes more intelligible and defensible. The Greek term "arete," translated as "virtue," can be manifested either as excellence in a particular role or in the whole of living. The term "techne," which has been translated as "art," is better imagined as any distinctly specialized trade or craft. Thus the antithesis is between civic virtue and specialized technical skill. Long before Plato, and contrary to the Platonic view, Homer conceived of eloquence as both arete and techne. In both the "Iliad" and "Odyssey," Homer suggests that eloquence is not only a specialized skill, but also an integral part of overall human excellence. To Socrates and Plato, the technical knowledge of artisans was the only kind of ordinary human knowledge that was genuine. An examination of the first third of Plato's dialogue "Protagoras" shows how Plato obscures the issue by exploiting the flexibility of the two terms arete and techne, and by studied neglect of the intimate connection between teaching arete and techne rhetoric. Modern educators can admit both arete and techne on the basis of a larger view of eloquence as radically non-specialized and morally requisite for all in a democratic society. (Nineteen references are attached.) (SG)

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# Eloquence as Virtue in Ancient Theory

One of Plato's main quarrels against the sophists was against their claim that they taught "virtue." Another was his opinion that rhetoric, which they taught for a living, was not properly an "art." These two quarrels seem separate in Plato. The "virtue" issue arises in the *Meno*, the "art" issue in the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus*; only the *Protagoras* features both, and even there their relationship is not immediately apparent. Once these two issues are brought and integrated together as one, however, with "virtue" and "art" constituting an antithesis, the sophistic position becomes both more intelligible and more defensible--which may well be precisely why Plato kept them separate.

In arguing for this interpretation I shall proceed first by defining the antithesis I propose. Next I shall explore important antecedents in Homer's treatment of eloquence. From Homer I shall return to Plato's work, first canvassing it broadly on this issue and finally examining the first third of the *Protagoras* in some detail.

The antithesis I am concerned with here spreads itself across a spectrum of specialization. It may be initially defined



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as the difference between being good as a mechanic (for example) and being good as a person. Although one person might well partake of both, they are radically different kinds of excellence.

In defining this antithesis, both "virtue" and "art" are potentially misleading as translations of *aretê* and *technê* respectively. The proper type of *aretê* is not gentle Jesus but rather the fierce and superb Achilles. *Aretê* is self-affirming rather than self-abnegating, and rather of this world than of any next. Many of the ideas we ordinarily associate with the term "virtue" are thus more or less inappropriate to *aretê*. These include faith, hope, and charity, selflessness, altruism, sexual chastity, and being nice to your enemies. This is not to say, though, that *aretê* is not a moral quality or value. We can surely see moral value in at least some of its five traditional components, which are wisdom, moderation, courage, justice, and piety (*Protagoras* 349b).

*Aretê* can be manifested either as excellence in a particular role or function (even by inanimate objects), or just in general, in the whole of living. But here I am concerned with the more general or holistic sense of *aretê*, a triumphant ability and achievement in the whole of living, and not confined to any one department or specialty--except perhaps war, in Homeric usage, for the word is kin to the name of the war-god, Arês. As Kitto says, "*aretê* . . . implies a respect for the wholeness or oneness of life, and a consequent dislike of specialization. It implies . . . a much higher idea of efficiency; an efficiency which

exists not in one department of life, but in life itself" (161; see also 171-174, Jaeger 3-14, Jarrett 35, Kerferd 131).

"Art" is also potentially misleading as a translation of *technê*. Today we tend to conceive of art as singular, transcendent, and wholly distinct from everyday practical operations and manufactures. Also, our obsession with originality causes us to associate art rather with the breach than the observance of tradition, method, and rule. In both of these respects our concept of art differs utterly from the Greek concept of *technê*. For the Greeks, a pair of sandals, the Parthenon, a knife, the latest cure, a well-trained horse, a battlefield strategy, and the tragedy *Antigonê* were each the product or outcome of a separate *technê*. Any distinctly specialized (usually professional) activity or craft, based on definite, ascertainable, and teachable principles and methods could be a *technê*.

For purposes of the antithesis I am proposing, the rational method aspect of *technê* is less crucial than the specialization aspect, wherein it stands in complete contrast to *aretê*. Adkins (6) writes that "No criteria of *technê*-hood exist before the *Gorgias*," and this may well be a valid caveat for the rational method criterion, but even Homer tends to restrict the term to obviously specialized crafts like the smith's and the shipwright's (*Odyssey* 3.433, 6.234, 11.614; *Iliad* 3.61).

Although the moral dimension of the antithesis between civic virtue and technical skill as models for rhetoric has been partially explored by Sharon Crowley and Susan Jarratt, the related dimension of specialization seems neglected. Yet its application

to and implications for rhetoric or eloquence begin to appear as early as Homer.

The most celebrated Homeric statement on rhetoric is in the *Iliad*, where Phoenix recalls that he taught the boy Achilles to be "both a speaker of words and a doer of deeds" (*Iliad* 9.443). This pairing of eloquence with action, as twin and complementary aspects of *aretê*, is not unique; it occurs in at least five other places in Homer (*Iliad* 9.53-54, 16.630-31, 18.105-6 and 252-53; *Odyssey* 2.272). The celebrity of this particular line among later rhetoricians (e.g. Cicero 3.57) is attributable to two things: here the word *rhêtêr* is used, obviously akin to "rhetoric"; and here alone these two aspects of *aretê*, the speaking and the doing, are represented as having been taught. If they have been taught, then they and the *aretê* they constitute must be teachable--and so Homer's considerable cultural authority seems to go against Plato in one of his major quarrels with the sophists. (On Homer's role in the intellectual life portrayed by Plato, see Buchanan 8-9).

The equation whereby the speaking of words plus the doing of deeds equals *aretê* is nowhere explicit in Homer. But the larger context of Phoenix' line prominently involves the cognate term *aristos* ("best"), and also makes clear that the eminence in question is decidedly non-specialized. Phoenix along with two others is here on an embassy from Agamemnon to Achilles. They are trying to reconcile that quarrel which is the central narrative subject of the *Iliad*. The dispute began over the captive concubine Briseïs; but her importance is almost purely symbolic, as

a token of honor. The army itself has first awarded her to the supreme fighting man, Achilles, as the meed of his valor. Since then Agamemnon has taken her for himself, acting on his own special authority as high king and commander-in-chief of the Achaeans, and because he feels it necessary to possess her as a token of his special status.

This central conflict of the epic is finally between two radically different notions of just what it means to be *aristos*, "the best": between, as Nestor puts it, the "sceptered king" and the "great bulwark of fell war" (1.275-284)--or as it might be in U.S. Army terms, between a general's stars and the Congressional Medal of Honor. Nestor and the cataloguer of ships have numerous grounds for calling Agamemnon *aristos*: he is the *wanax*, the high king and commander-in-chief, the heir of Pelops and Atreus; he has brought the largest contingent of force to Troy; and at home he rules over more people and treasure than any other chieftain. While Achilles is a prince and a commander too, we rarely if ever see him functioning in any such special capacity; rather he proves and calls himself *aristos Achaiôn*, "the best of the Achaeans" (1.244), in the common capacity of front-line fighting man. He is simply better than anyone at the job they are all there to do.

The idea that eloquence and fighting prowess are teachable is therefore tied to an idea of excellence, of *aretê*, that is distinctly non-specialized in character. Admittedly, in the case of Achilles we are dealing primarily with the deeds side--he admits he is less than the best with words (18.106). But analogy

suggests that eloquence is likewise non-specialized, since the two are so regularly paired.

This view of eloquence emerges even more distinctly in the *Odyssey*, where Athene disguised as Mentor coaches Telemachus before he meets Nestor:

> Back to her then spoke wise-souled Telemachus:
> "Mentor, how then shall I go? How shall I greet him?
> I have not yet gained experience of intricate speeches;
> and it is embarrassing for a lad to question an older man."
> Then the goddess spoke out to him, bright-eyed Athene:
> "Telemachus, some things you will discern within your own soul, and some things a divine spirit will suggest.
> For I do not suppose that you were born and have been raised without the favor of the gods." (3.21-28)

This exchange actually sets the two antithetical models of eloquence against each other. Telemachus at first regards eloquence as a discrete and intricate skill requiring specific experience and practice; but the goddess in reply locates it in effect in his whole person--in a relationship with the divine that has conditioned his birth and whole upbringing rather than being specific to the rhetorical occasion.

Later in the same poem Odysseus also speaks of eloquence as a divine gift but in a different way, as a particular and distinct ability that varies independently of other blessings:

> Thus the gods do not give graceful things to all men,
> neither physical makeup nor soul nor public speaking.

> For this man is inferior in shape, but a god crowns his words with form, and others take delight and look at him; without stumbling, he speaks forth with gentle propriety, and he shines forth among the assembly, and they look on him as a god as he comes up to town. Another, by contrast, in shape resembles the immortals; but they do not crown his words about with grace. (8.167-75)

Especially significant in this passage is the idea of eloquence as a crown of form, superadded to some presumably plain, raw, or basic kind of language. For the notion of superadded form is usually what supplies the special and unique province of rhetoric when and if rhetoric becomes a specialty.

Long before Socrates wrangled with the sophists on this issue, then, Homeric epic had paved the way for both ways of conceiving of eloquence: either as a *technê*, that is, a discrete, particular, specialized ability or craft; or as an integral part of *aretê*, overall human excellence. Socrates and/or Plato, however--and I make no distinction between them--being well-nigh obsessed with the *technê* side of the antithesis, resolutely disparaged and ignored the other side and thus the antithesis itself. That is why, when we read in Plato of Socrates' confrontations with the sophistic movement, it appears to be two separate issues when he objects to their profession of teaching virtue and when he expresses himself as not satisfied that rhetoric properly qualifies as an art.

The Socratic or Platonic obsession with *technê* and specialization is almost everywhere apparent. Socrates decided at the

very beginning of his philosophic career that technical knowledge, the knowledge possessed by artisans, was the only kind of ordinary human knowledge that was genuine (*Apology* 22c-d). Alcibiades observes what any reader of Plato can confirm, that Socrates "is always talking of smiths and shoemakers and tanners" (*Symposium* 221e; cf. *Gorgias* 491a). A highly typical pattern of Socratic argument goes like this: if we are properly to understand X, we must come to know X as the shoemaker knows shoes; or we must discover who it is that stands in relation to X as the shoemaker to shoes, namely as a professional specialist on the subject. The *Republic* establishes the principle of specialization at the very heart of Platonic philosophy. "Let the shoemaker stick to his last" is there both the first purpose that leads people to come together to make a city, and the final purpose--justice--towards which civil society aims.

It is in the first third of Plato's dialogue *Protagoras* that the whole issue is most readily intelligible. As the dialogue begins, a young man named Hippocrates begs Socrates to introduce him to Protagoras, under whom he hopes to study. Socrates responds by quizzing him on what sort of teaching he expects from the old sophist. The quizzing proceeds by analogy with one *technê* after another. You learn a *technê* by hiring an actual practitioner to be your teacher; and having so learned, you become just such another practitioner yourself. Now clearly what Protagoras is is a sophist; yet young Hippocrates, who proposes to study with him, does not want to be a sophist, in the sense of an itinerant peddler of instruction.

Socrates then offers him a way out. He points out that in such cases as orthography, harp-playing, and wrestling, gentlemen study under specialists but "not with a view to the *technê*, so as to be a professional, but by way of cultural education as befits a private and free man" (312b). The distinction here is between vocational instruction or apprenticeship on the one hand, and a "liberal arts" education on the other. But liberal arts are still arts, and so when Hippocrates eagerly embraces this alternative analogy, he is still faced with the question of what a sophist's specialty might be.

Hippocrates tries defining "sophist" as one who knows "wise things" or "matters of skill" (*sopha*); and again, more precisely, as one who knows how to make others "formidable in speaking." Both definitions fall short, according to Socrates, in that either claim could be made for the master of any *technê* whatever. For example, the painter knows wise things or matters of skill, and by conveying this knowledge can presumably make people formidable speakers, all on the subject of making likenesses. Thus the sophist's specialty remains unknown. The assumption that there must be a specialty remains unquestioned.

Next Socrates poses the same problem to Protagoras himself. He asks what his young friend can expect to get in return for his tuition money. Protagoras answers,

> Young man, this will result for you if you attend to me: the day you meet with me, you will go home having become better, and on the next day the same; and every day always improving towards what is better. (318a-b)

The calculated generality of this answer already hints at the key distinction to be drawn between *aretê* and *technê*. But Socrates declines to see this. He demands to know "better at what?" and points out again that the claim would befit the teacher of any *technê* whatever, so that the particular *technê* remains unspecified.

But Protagoras is less easily tripped up than his young admirer. He explicitly and decisively excludes the concept of *technê* from his approach as a teacher. A common error of certain other sophists, he says, is that they inflict on their students such studies as arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, and music, each a distinct (albeit "liberal") *technê*. Such technical and specialized studies, he says, are precisely what students are fleeing when they go to a sophist. What they seek, and what he himself provides, is a wholly different kind of instruction:

> The thing to be learned is good counsel, both about household matters, so that one may best manage one's own house, and about matters of state, so that one may be most effective in dealing with them, both in doing and in speaking. (318e-319b)

The closing phrase here recalls Achilles' education in general *aretê* from Phoenix, though where doing of deeds was the greater concern in the *Iliad*, here "good counsel" tends to reverse that emphasis. The whole statement shows, once again, that this is no specialized instruction.

But once again Socrates comes back with the very term Protagoras has spurned: "You seem to me to mean the civic *technê*

and to undertake to make men good citizens." To identify a *technê* thus, as proper to the citizen *qua* citizen, is to strip the term of its crucial meaning as specialized expertise, by a kind of oxymoron. Protagoras agrees to this description of his profession.

Socrates immediately turns to attack. He holds that these matters are not teachable. The Athenian assembly, he points out, listens only to the appropriate artisans whenever a question falls within the special province of any one *technê*. On a technical question of shipbuilding, for instance, none but a shipwright is heeded. But on the "matters of state" that Protagoras is talking about, questions of civic management, all citizens are heeded. They need no special credentials, such as being able to point to acknowledged experts as their teachers (319b-d). Socrates presents this as an argument that these matters are not teachable or learnable. But it is really more an argument that they do not fall within the exclusive province of any specialist. And this is what Protagoras has been saying all along.

The same applies to Socrates' next objection, where he says,

> The wisest and best of the citizens are unable to pass on this *aretê* that they have to others. Thus Pericles . . . educated [his own sons] beautifully and well in those subjects for which he felt teachers were appropriate. But as for those concerning which he is wise himself, he neither educated them himself nor committed them to anyone else; rather they themselves go about and graze like sacred cattle, on the chance that

they may somewhere come across *aretê* spontaneously. (319e-320a)

In response to Socrates' arguments Protagoras narrates a special version of the Prometheus myth, in which Prometheus steals for human use not only fire but also technical skill or wisdom (*entechnos sophia*), which both depends on fire and turns it to useful account. But although he could and did steal these things from Hephaestus and Athene, he could not lay hold of civic skill or wisdom (*politikê sophia*), which belonged to Zeus and thus was better guarded. With this left out, the stolen gifts were not enough to enable us to hold our own against the beasts. We could and did make useful things, get enough food, and even devise language, all through our technical skill. But we could not join forces against the stronger beasts in any stable alliance; for whenever we tried it we wronged one another "for lack of the civic *technê*." At last, lest the smoke from altars cease with our race, Zeus sent us via Hermes two gifts, shame and justice. Hermes asked if these, twin aspects of civic *aretê*, were to be bestowed on a few experts, in the manner of a specialized *technê* like medicine. One doctor, after all, can serve many patients, who therefore need not master medicine themselves. But Zeus said this case must be different. All must be given these two things, he decreed; and if any should fail to partake of them, they must be killed (320c-322d; see Jaeger 299 for comparison with other versions by Hesiod and Aeschylus of the Prometheus story).

Protagoras has taken up Socrates' oxymoron "civic *technê*" to show how his concept of *aretê* is peculiarly resistant to analogy

with any specialized *technê*. As he continues his answer he offers an analogy of his own, substituting flute-playing for justice (327a-c). The effect is almost parodic, for in order to make the analogy fit what he is saying about *aretê*, he must posit a city-state whose very life depends on the flute-playing of all of its citizens. The fancy is more than a little ridiculous, but at the same time it effectively advances his point. If any ordinary *technê* such as flute-playing is to be properly analogous to the civic one, it must first be transformed out of all recognition, into a universal imperative. Though playing the flute will remain learned behavior, the results of this transformation will include many of what Socrates has seen as signs that a thing is not and cannot be taught. Socrates has mistaken these signs, and failed to note others, which all go to show that the teaching of *aretê*, far from being nowhere, is everywhere.

Even here in the first third of the dialogue Plato is obscuring the issue by exploiting the flexibility of the two terms *aretê* and *technê* until they are almost interchangeable (Adkins 5-6, 10), and by studied neglect of the intimate connection between teaching *aretê* and teaching rhetoric. After this the dialogue meanders among quibbles and procedural wrangles and some of Socrates' own pet themes to an inconclusive ending, where Socrates unjustly accuses Protagoras of inconsistency, under cover of confessing inconsistency himself (Kerferd 135-6; Havelock 178). But Protagoras' position here is consistent and tenable. We latter-day partisans of the sophists have I think fallen for Plato's trap if we regard it as two separate calumnies

that they professed to teach virtue and that their specialty of rhetoric was not a proper art. Rather than defend both or either separately, we can admit both together, on the basis of a larger view of eloquence as radically non-specialized and even as morally requisite for all in a democratic society.

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